

DECISION NOTICE

GALLE ACQUISITION

Prepared by Region 2, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
May 30, 1997

PROPOSAL

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing fee title acquisition of 123 acres of the Galle Ranch in the Lost Creek area approximately 5 miles north of Anaconda, Montana. The acquisition would protect critical bighorn sheep, mule deer and elk winter range as well as seasonal and year-round habitat for a variety of small mammals and birds, and would provide an addition to the existing Lost Creek Wildlife Management Area. It would be administered under the amended Lost Creek Wildlife Management Area Plan. The cost of the property would be \$98,480 with funds from the Habitat Montana Program (Bighorn Sheep Auction revenue).

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS

FWP prepared an environmental assessment pursuant to MEPA, a management plan and socio-economic assessment pursuant to the 1987 act of the Montana legislature known as House Bill 526. FWP made these documents available during a public comment period that began on May 2 and ended on May 31, 1997. FWP advertised the public comment period and availability of the documents by a legal notice entitled "PUBLIC COMMENT SOUGHT" in the Missoulian, Great Falls Tribune, Helena Independent Record, Billings Gazette and Anaconda Leader. Over 50 copies of the environmental assessment were distributed to adjacent landowners, sportsman groups and other interested parties. In addition, representatives from FWP met with the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Planning Department to explain the proposal and answer questions.

A public hearing was held at 7:00 p.m. May 22, 1997, at Fairmont Hot Springs and was attended by eight individuals. This hearing date was advertised in the environmental assessment and in the legal notices published in the newspapers.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

A total of eight comments was received, including six written and two oral comments at the public hearing. All eight comments were in support of the proposal. Written comments were received from the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Planning Department, Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Commission, Anaconda Sportsmen's Club (two letters), Skyline Sportsmen's Association, and the Public Lands Access Association.

The majority of comments emphasized the importance of protecting and placing in public

Deer Lodge

ownership critical winter range for bighorn sheep, mule deer and elk. In addition, the proposal was supported because it would allow improved public recreation opportunities such as hunting and wildlife viewing, and improved public access to state and federal lands. One comment specifically endorsed the use of Bighorn Sheep Auction Funds for acquisition of critical habitat, while another encouraged FWP to consider more projects similar to this proposal.

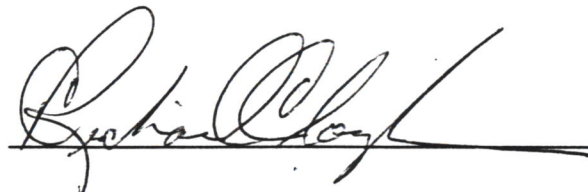
DECISION

Utilizing the environmental assessment and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed fee title acquisition.

In light of public comments and internal agency review, I accept the draft environmental assessment, management plan and socio-economic assessment as final. FWP supports the concept of using fee title acquisition to protect and conserve native plant communities and wildlife habitat by preventing subdivision or other commercial development on these critical areas. Recreational and residential subdivision of rural areas in western Montana, including Lost Creek, continues to increase at a rapid rate. Subdivisions fragment wildlife habitat, interrupt migration and travel corridors, increase human disturbance to sensitive wildlife species, reduce the ability to properly manage wildlife and erode traditional ranching lifestyles.

Both FWP's analysis and public input strongly support acquisition of this property to preserve and protect critical winter range for bighorn sheep, mule deer and elk, and to provide recreational opportunities for hunting, viewing, and improved access to other public lands in the area. These resources and opportunities may be threatened by land use changes which are presently occurring in western Montana, including the Lost Creek area.

After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support, it is my recommendation to purchase fee title acquisition of the Galle property, subject to approval by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Richard Clough", is written over a horizontal line.

C. Richard Clough
Regional Supervisor
Missoula, MT
May 30, 1997